

PRESS RELEASE – 175th Anniversary of St. Mary's Cathedral

On Monday, 30th September the Catholic Cathedral Church of St Mary, in the centre of Newcastle, is commemorating its quartoseptennial (175th) anniversary year. The solemn occasion is being marked by High Mass celebrated by the Rt Rev Robert Byrne CO, Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle, together with nine fellow bishops, clergy, religious and parishioners from across the diocese together with civic dignitaries and members of other Faiths. The Mass is followed by a reception at the Assembly Rooms, just as it had been at the original opening.

The idea of St Mary's was actually conceived, in 1838, by Fr James Worswick who had recognised the need for a second large church in the town to serve its rapidly growing Catholic population.

The industrial revolution and the desperate conditions in Ireland at that time, resulted in thousands of immigrant workers seeking better lives in this region, and so it was to the enormous credit of those first building committee members, that the project was embarked upon with no initial finance but with considerable determination and faith. In 1844 and paid for in the most part with the pennies of the poor, St Mary's Catholic Church was opened.

It had been designed by the Victorian architect, Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin, who was a convert to Catholicism and is now most famous for his major contribution to the neo-Gothic decoration of the Houses of Parliament.

In those early times, day to day life for St Mary's congregation was extremely harsh, and frequent outbreaks of typhus hit this poor community. Indeed Bishop William Riddell, the first administrator, sadly died from typhus only three years after the church had been opened. His death was a direct consequence of his daily visits to the fever hospital, and as such, he became a true martyr to charity. His mausoleum is in the Cathedral garden, and the crypt, in which his remains are housed, lies beneath.

In 1850, six years after the opening, its status was elevated to Cathedral and St Mary's became the mother church of the Diocese of Hexham (later to be renamed Hexham and Newcastle).

Thanks largely to a bequest in 1870, the tower and steeple could finally be added to complete Pugin's vision and Dunn and Hansom were the chosen architects who were responsible for the design and construction in 1872.

With its fine needle spire, standing 222 feet high St Mary's silhouette has become a familiar and well-loved landmark on the skyline; for many years it was the tallest building in the city.

During its lifetime, the Cathedral has welcomed many distinguished persons. In 2002, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II unveiled the statue of Cardinal Basil Hume, a son of Newcastle, and, a year later, it played host to the President of Ireland.

Since the millennium, the Cathedral has seen many cosmetic changes; thanks to the generosity of sponsors there is a wonderful new organ and gallery, a completely re-tiled floor and five new beautiful stained glass windows. In addition to the Pauline

Book Shop and Cloister Cafe, the Mercy Hub has recently opened with a mission to offer help to the young and vulnerable in today's society.

So at this point in its life, all who are connected with this magnificent building hope that St Mary's may continue, long into the future, to contribute both spiritually and practically to the people of this city.